Listening to People: Using Social Psychology to Spotlight an Overlooked Virtue

Abstract:

I offer a novel interdisciplinary approach to understanding the communicative task of listening, which is under-theorised compared to its more conspicuous counterpart, speech. By correlating a Rylean view of mental actions with a virtue ethical framework, I show listeners' internal activity as a morally relevant feature of how they treat people. The listener employs a policy of responsiveness in managing the extent to which they allow a speaker's voice to be centred within their more effortful, engaged attention. A just listener's policy of responsiveness avoids unwarrantedly dismissing speakers' messages on the basis of peripheral attention alone.

Introduction

A familiar, everyday concern that is conspicuously overlooked in philosophical literature is what it means to listen to people. Whilst speech is an overtly active process, occupying a place of prominence in several philosophical subdisciplines, listening scarcely makes an appearance in our theorising, perhaps because the nature of listening as an active process is obscured by its comparative unobservability relative to the activity of speaking. The inconspicuousness of listening makes it easy to overlook the theoretical importance of understanding what it is we are doing when we listen, particularly with a view towards grasping the ethical importance of listening behaviour. The explanandum I have in view is not the perceptual task of hearing, but the social task of establishing a relation to a speaker that is rightly open and responsive. Although listening appears more internally contained and less obviously productive than speaking, listening, like speech, is arguably a kind of skilful action which features throughout the fabric of our lives and structures the way we treat others. As such, how we listen is as important to our character as is how we speak. My aim is to offer a theoretical account of what it is to listen to someone, and in particular to draw out the ethical dimension of how we respond to the speech of others. My account must be supplied with a vocabulary apt for describing the covertly active processes involved in listening, and with a grounding in empirical support coherent with the more familiar phenomenological features of listening. I supply these resources by drawing on concepts from foundational work in experimental social psychology of persuasion, which deals with the mechanisms underpinning how people's attitudes change in response to, for example, advertising and political messaging.

I do not seek in the present paper to examine the ways in which a discussion of listening can interrogate our moral theorisation, pushing us towards one or another view of morality or pushing us to refine our theories in various ways. Although listening raises intriguing questions for an act-based approach to morality, I leave these aside here in favour of an agent-based approach, using virtue ethics to highlight the activity and experience of being a listener. It is outside the scope of the present work to investigate the experience of being listened to and how someone's listening activities impact the speakers towards whom those activities are directed. This limitation of scope does not indicate a belief on my part that listening is something the listener does for her own sake or that listening is something that can be theorised without developing an account of how listening behaviour affects others. Rather,

the narrowness is due to limitations of space and a desire to offer an adequately detailed account of what the task of listening itself consists in as a form of action, and the ethical importance thereof.[1]

This approach is motivated by the refrain I typically hear when I talk to professional listeners – therapists, doctors, teachers, and consultants – about what it means to be a good listener, and they frequently reply that they wish they had a better vocabulary for talking about *how* to do listening well. It is difficult to strive to be a good listener, let alone to recognise what is feels like when one is succeeding at being a good listener, if one does not first have a clear grasp of what the *tasks* of listening are. For this reason, I give an account of virtuous listening centred on the tasks involved in the skilful action of listening.

I proceed as follows. (1) I give a brief overview of the rather limited literature available covering the issue of listening, and in particular, listening as a virtue, to show why these accounts are inadequate. (2) I offer some alternative resources for articulating the ethical structure of the experience of listening to someone: Gilbert Ryle's notions of courses of action as policies of infra-doings, and Linda Zagzebski's account of intellectual virtues. (3) I discuss the variation in levels of salience that we perceive in different voices, and the salience-based heuristics which lend efficiency to our responses to others, but which also can breed unjust unresponsiveness towards others. Social psychology of persuasion and attitude change furnishes us with vocabulary for talking about such efficiencies and the alternative, other-centring mode of responding to messages. (4) Framing listening as an activity of managing the interplay between these modes, I argue that to listen to someone (justly) is to establish a relation to that person under which the speaker's messages are not debarred from higher-effort, content-based modes of processing but are centred by the listener. To refuse to listen to someone is to obstruct the transmission of their communicative meanings by employing salience-based efficiency measures in such a way as to block their message from more central routes of processing. (5) I discuss the refinement of skilful listening behaviour and what it looks like, in theory, for someone to be a fully virtuous listener.

Before I proceed with the overview of existing literature, a couple brief notes are needed about assumptions I am making. First, there is an urgent question that often arises of when we are obligated to listen to someone, versus when, for our own welfare or on the basis of threats posed by various speakers, we might have reason to choose not to listen to them in the first place. I recognise the importance of this question, but it seems out of order to try to explain when we are or are not obligated to listen if we have not first gotten clear about what listening entails. I therefore defer the issue of when *not* to listen to someone, and to support this deferral, I write with the assumption that 'the listener' is someone who has a role-based responsibility to listen to the speaker. Second, the question inevitably arises about what to call a person who does not rightly respond to a speaker, being perhaps a poor/unvirtuous listener, or not a listener at all. To preserve the clarity of the roles in the communicative exchange, I refer to the non-speaking, respondent participant of the dialogue as a 'listener' regardless of whether in a given scenario the person actually does listen. The result is that I may at time refer to a listener who is not listening: I embrace the jarring dissonance between the person's conversational role and their behaviour as a natural critique of the ethical failure nascent in a person's failure to fulfil their role as a listener.

[1] As such, I likewise leave aside perceptual questions of hearing, of the relation between hearing and listening, and of the structure and imagery of the ear. My account is not specific to the auditory mode, because the social task of listening to someone is as much at issue in written conversational exchanges as it is in audible communication.

1) Overview of Existing Literature

There are a few theoretical accounts of listening available. Philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara[2] traces listening as a kind of social extension of an otherwise private epistemic exercise emerging from the accounts of Heidegger and Gadamer on the pursuit of understanding. Educational theorist Suzanne Rice[3] argues that good listening is a wholesale intensification of attention and narrowing of focus to auditory stimuli, such that one who listens well must both intensify and narrow the field of her attention in order to closely engage with a single speaker, to the exclusion of other stimuli. However, what constitutes a good practice of listening varies in different situations, sometimes even requiring simultaneous alertness to a broad array of stimuli. Since a broad form of listening would be the opposite of the wholesale attention-intensification and narrowing Rice prescribes as the iconic meaning of good listening, she concludes that listening cannot be a singular virtue. For example, at many times during a typical day it would be unvirtuous of a classroom teacher to intensely and narrowly listen to one student, instead of monitoring and attending to the class as a whole via a more diffuse form of attention. Rice therefore posits that there are multiple irreconcilable tasks referred to under 'listening virtuously', which, being so varied and applying to such differing circumstances, do not bear further theorisation together under the notion of listening being a virtue as such.[4]

Philosopher Joseph Beatty[5], like Rice, argues that listening is related to many other elements of virtuousness, but his solution is to cast good listening as both a virtue and a meta-virtue similar to *phronesis*,[6] because good listening is a route to the refinement of virtues in general. Beatty's conception of listening is the taking of a particularly detached, neutral position from which to respond to others, which not only results in right communicative responsiveness (listening as a virtue) but in the increased pursuit and acquisition of virtues in general (listening as a meta-virtue).

Haroutunian-Gordon and Laverty[7] offer an overview of accounts of listening through the history of philosophy, few as they are, emphasizing again the pragmatic role of the listener in soliciting the speaker's meaning as a route to increased social or epistemic understanding, rather than emphasizing the moral aspects of such solicitous activity. Interestingly, in Haroutunian-Gordon and Laverty's collection, Leonard Waks[8] represents John Dewey as holding listening to be primarily a democratic virtue, in that active listening is an effort to see all voices duly included in discourse – a view which shares resonances with that offered below. This higher-altitude view of listening merits

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[2] Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, New Ed edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995).

[3] Suzanne Rice, "Toward an Aristotelian Conception of Good Listening," *Educational Theory* **61**, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 141–53.

[4] I am not convinced that the variety of listening-related tasks required of the virtuous person makes listening a poor candidate for inclusion in an arsenal of virtues. On the contrary, it seems that one particularly useful strength of virtue ethics is its ability to cope with virtues whose manifestations can take a wide variety of forms. To be courageous can take the form of all kinds of unrelated activities, from charging into battle, to initiating a conversation, to undergoing surgery to donate a kidney. More on this strategy of categorisation in Section 2.

[5] Joseph Beatty, "Good Listening," *Educational Theory* **49**, no. 3 (September 1, 1999): 281–98.

[6] In describing listening as a meta-virtue, Beatty writes that it is 'a "virtue of virtue" in that it is a fundamental avenue of understanding one's own and the other's character and occasioning its transformation' (Beatty, 281.).

[7] Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and Megan J. Laverty, "Listening: An Exploration of Philosophical Traditions," *Educational Theory* **61**, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 117–24.

[8] Leonard J. Waks, "John Dewey on Listening and Friendship in School and Society," *Educational Theory* **61**, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 191–205.

further exploration as relates to the view I offer below, but in the present work, I leave aside the political register of listening in favour of a more focused look at how the process of listening itself actually works.

The account I argue for here sits between Rice's scepticism and Beatty's enthusiasm for classing listening as such as a virtue. Like both of them, I am focused on the moral meaning of listening rather than on listening as a purely empirical tool, although, again like both Rice and Beatty, I follow the Aristotelian tradition of positing an intimate relation between moral and intellectual virtues, as a result of which the empirical curiosity for truth driving the accounts of Fiumara and those in Haroutunian-Gordon and Laverty's view would be a relevant reason for striving to develop the intellectual virtue(s) related to listening. Inspiring my account is Miranda Fricker's theory of the virtue of Epistemic Justice[9], in which she highlights the dually moral and intellectual (epistemic) nature of justice in the testimonial context. For this reason, I follow Fricker in taking as my point of departure Zagzebski's work on intellectual virtues[10], since Zagzebski's definition of a virtue in general is designed to accommodate both moral and intellectual virtues in a manner that is derived from, and yet more unified than, Aristotle's founding account of the two kinds of virtue – moral and intellectual virtue – in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[11] I say more about Zagzebski's account in Section 2.

Since I have selected as my explanandum not just auditory stimuli but conversational exchanges in general, including sign language and written exchanges, I diverge straightaway from Rice's view that listening is simplistically a narrowing intensification of auditory attention. An adequate theory of listening must account for its predominantly interpersonal rather than sensory function. Those who employ the capacity of listening in a virtuous manner would be virtuous listeners; to specify such an attribution, what we need is a way to identify the specific interpersonal value of the excellence that a virtuous listener possesses. By aligning this interpersonal excellence with the family of virtues having to do with justice, we can account for what it means to listen virtuously across a broad array of situational requirements, keeping in focus the particular social meaning of listening to someone rather than foregrounding the diversity of perceptual and linguistic systems and operations that can be involved in listening. To act justly has as many different manifestations as there are different situations requiring justice. To listen justly likewise has far more manifestations than simply amplifying and focusing attention to auditory stimuli in the selective way that raised Rice's concerns.

Beatty prioritises the interpersonal element rather than the perceptual element of listening with his winner-take-all theory of listening – construing listening as a virtue *and* a meta-virtue, rather than focusing on the perceptual definitions of the verb 'to listen' – in which perceptual systems simply serve the social enterprise of listening, which is optimised under conditions of detachment. Making detachment central to an account of listening strikes me as a counter-intuitive choice, considering how much emphasis Beatty places on the interpersonal rather than perceptual nature of listening. Indeed, it seems straightforward that good listening involves resisting the distorting effects of strong prejudices and unwarranted biases, but I am sceptical whether detachment is the best strategy to employ against such distortions. Instead, a satisfactory account of listening should explain how becoming a virtuous listener involves training oneself to respond justly to the speech of others through attentive *engagement* with what they are saying, rather than detachment. To facilitate such a view, I argue that the excellence by which one listens virtuously is an excellence of justice, and that to be

[9] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[10] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1996).
[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

virtuous as a listener involves seeking to establish and maintain just relationships with interlocutors. The virtue of listening justly would of course be seconded to the meta-virtue of justice[12] and, like Fricker's virtue of epistemic justice, function as a hybrid moral and intellectual virtue.

2) Listening as a Policy of Infra-doings

The specific activities that can be associated with listening are a diverse array, including but not limited to perceptual, linguistic, relational, and cognitive faculties. Further, a good listener may take various steps to reassure a speaker of her attention, such as by closing a door to remove distractions; bending down to eye level when attending to a speaking child; verbally committing to leaving a conversation unresolved, or promising the speaker that she will continue listening and trying to understand his point of view. So, it is important to specify what activities are themselves to be taken as constitutive of listening, and which activities are subordinate functions, contingently incorporated into the process of listening according to the requirements of particular scenarios. If listening is taken to be constituted by something as specific as 'closing a door' or 'bending down to eye level' – both tasks which in some instance support listening but may at times be irrelevant or even obstructive to listening – then we run the risk of being like Gilbert Ryle's boy at the zoo[13], who is on a quest to take a photograph of a mammal. With dismay the boy passes by signs for bears, foxes, lions, and monkeys but never finds an enclosure marked as containing 'mammals'. To avoid such a category mistake and correctly identify the activity of listening, we need to identify listening with the broader category of action that controls the array of more specific subordinate actions such as those listed above.

To address activities that are best assessed at the broader category level, Ryle provides the idea of a *course of action*[14], which functions much as a policy that controls a potentially enormous array of subordinate activities. He gives the example of seven people waiting on a station platform for a train. There is no one discrete action that is, precisely, 'waiting'. One person does a crossword puzzle; one smokes a pipe, and one chats to another. Of these various meantime activities, Ryle says,

> For to wait for a train is (nearly enough) intentionally-*not*-to-move-far-from-where-the-wanted-train-is-due-to-come-in-at-any-moment-before-it-comes-in…
> Between the seven or seventy such *infra*-things that the seven train awaiting travellers were witnessed in the act of doing there need have been no visible, audible or introspective similarities. The significant, though unphotographable and unintrospectable similarity was their common *Supra*-policy, namely, their all alike resolutely not doing any of the various things that would remove them far from the train's arrival platform.[15]

Ryle's notion of a course of action is well suited to describe many of the complex undertakings that fill our lives. Listening to someone, much like waiting for a train, is not a singular action but a course of action, a policy which coordinates the myriad choices and activities sprinkled throughout an extended period of time towards the accomplishment of a given purpose. To listen to someone is, to mimic Ryle's style of description, intentionally-to-establish-a-relationship-of-adequate-responsiveness-to-someone-so-as-*not*-to-close-oneself-to-her-communicative-attempts. To achieve

[12] see Book V in *NE*, Aristotle, 2004. Op. cit. note 11, Book V.
[13] Gilbert Ryle, "Courses of Action or the Uncatchableness of Mental Acts," *Philosophy* **75**, no. 3 (2000): 333–34.
[14] Op. cit. note 13, 335.
[15] Op. cit. note 13, 340.

this end, a person does not merely engage in the mundane activities supporting the perceptual processing of the speaker's linguistic signal. A listener also engages in the cognitive work of attending to the level of effort that she gives to processing the speaker's message, ensuring that the effort level is sufficient to duly facilitate the speaker's communicative prospects.

These ideas will be cashed out below, but a key element to notice at this juncture is the way that listening involves establishing relationships such that a person will deal *adequately* with another person's speech, according to the requirements of a given scenario. To deal inadequately with a person's speech is to close oneself off prematurely to her communicative attempt, to assume on the basis of surface features of the scenario that what the person is saying can be dismissed without any further attention. On such a view, to not listen to someone is something more than merely mishearing or not hearing her; to not listen to someone is to close oneself to that person's communicative endeavour prematurely.

The difference between what these concepts pick out can be seen in how we would describe a situation in which a lifeguard orders swimmers out of a pool, and one swimmer fails to respond to the lifeguard's instructions. If the swimmer was underwater at the time of the instruction and simply did not hear the lifeguard, we would not say that the swimmer 'did not listen' to the lifeguard, but that he 'did not hear' the lifeguard. If the swimmer were a foreign tourist who does not know the language the lifeguard used, we say he 'did not understand' the lifeguard. But if the swimmer heard the lifeguard, understood the language and the meaning of all the words used, and yet refused to display an appropriate form of *responsiveness* to the instruction, we have an example of someone who did not *listen*, because the swimmer has made a judgement about what the speech of the lifeguard means for him and requires of him, and the judgement he makes is conspicuously inappropriate to the situation.

When we talk about whether a person is listening, we are talking about the judgements that the person is making about their level of responsiveness to what a speaker is saying, where the level of responsiveness refers to three main components, beginning with (1) the judgement the listener makes about the possible *importance* of what the speaker says. This judgement in turn informs the listener's policy with regard to (2) the level of effort the person is willing to put towards processing the speaker's message. Furthermore, when a person judges a speaker's speech as something important in some way – be it important to her as a source of information, or perhaps important because it is important to the speaker – she in effect establishes for herself a policy of responsiveness to the speaker that involves (3) a decision about her openness to persuasion, such as a decision not to dismiss out of hand what the speaker says. The further measures she takes to understand and determine her replies will vary according to the particulars of the situation.

Alternatively, when a person establishes a policy of non-responsiveness to a speaker, the person is judging the speaker's speech as unimportant, whether because the listener simply does not care about what the speaker has to say, or because she is committed to a belief that what the speaker says is unreliable or sure to be wrong. Such a non-responsiveness policy is what we pick out when we accuse people of not just failing, but refusing to listen to us. Whatever stance a listener takes towards a speaker can be viewed as a policy of responsiveness towards the speaker. Whether the policy is supportive or obstructive, the policy can be cashed out in terms of the same three factors given above. As such, whether we consider a person to be listening to someone turns on what sort of policy of responsiveness the listener establishes towards the speaker, based on (1) judgements she makes about the possible content or importance of the person's speech, (2) the level of effort she contributes to processing the person's message, and (3) the decision she makes about her openness to persuasion by the speaker.

Taken together, these elements of a policy of responsiveness form the basis for construing listening as an inherently moral concept, since taking up a policy of responsiveness involves taking a stance on the importance of a person's speech and the level of processing effort due her.[16] We would ordinarily say that when a person hears and processes bits of language, she listens *just in case* she meets the other person's speech with a policy of responsiveness that involves adequately and rightly taking into consideration what the person has said. To suggest that someone has listened carefully but towards sinister ends is to suggest the person is doing something other than 'listening well'. Although they have perhaps skilfully and adeptly navigated the implicatures, they cannot be said to have *adequately and rightly* handled the other person's speech, as any manipulative sitcom antagonist shows: she understands a speaker's meaning and responds skilfully, but she is not 'a good listener'. Thus, we can say that to possess the excellence of listening to people is to possess both the right motivation to bring about the ends of the speaker's success and the skill in bringing about that success. By these features we can categorise listening as a virtue. But in order to be clear about what it is that lends listening its moral structure, I refer to the virtue as 'listening justly'. It is then easy enough to say that someone who listens unjustly has failed to get listening right because of a problem in the motivational component of the virtue of listening, even though all the subordinate skills of listening are present in terms of the capacities for hearing, paying attention, understanding the language, and drawing implicatures.

I capture these features in my account by framing the morality of listening using Zagzebski's definition of a virtue, which is as follows:

> A virtue, then, can be defined as a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end. What I mean by a motivation is a disposition to have a motive; a motive is an action guiding emotion with a certain end, either internal or external.[17]

At the core of this definition are two familiar components: motivation towards an end, and reliable success in bringing about that end. To have reliable success in bringing about an end involves, at least at the beginning, having a skill or set of skills. When the deployment of those skills has become a consistent habit, on account of the person's having a disposition towards using those skills in the right times and in the right ways, towards the right people, this person is said to possess the relevant virtue.

Listening is an intriguing case because, like talking, it is a basic human capacity essential for communication, and as such, all interpersonal exchanges are characterised by *how*, rather than whether or how much, the participants deploy these two communicative capacities. Thus, to listen virtuously follows a different pattern than generosity, for example. To be generous is to give one's

[16] Compare, for example, what Lovibond writes about the concept or *Bildung* of a virtue providing "a stable point of view with which we can identify for the purpose of talking about the 'demands' of, say, courage, and of the courageous person as 'responding' to these; and when we do talk in this ethically loaded way (as opposed to saying simply that A faced the danger while B ran away), we demonstrate our investment in the forces that direct *Bildung* and that designate certain behaviour-patterns as the ones flowing from a 'clear perception' of the ethical" (Sabina Lovibond, *Essays on Ethics and Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79–80.). To describe something as 'courageous' rather than describing bare actions just is to take a stance on the ethical quality of certain actions; likewise, to describe someone as listening well rather than employing any other of a litany of more barely descriptive verbs (like hearing, paying attention, understanding, believing…) is to take a stance on the ethical rightness of the way in which those other verbal activities were deployed.

[17] Op. cit. note 10, 137.

resources to others for their benefit, potentially at loss to oneself. A person is viewed as more or less generous according to whether, and how much, the person gives to others. Listening virtuously follows a pattern more like that of Aristotle's speech related virtues of truthfulness and ready wit[18], in that whenever one speaks, it is not the mere presence of speaking-behaviour that is virtuous, but the quality of that speech as truthful or untruthful, as lacking or possessing wit, which for Aristotle forms the basis for judging the virtuousness of the speaker with respect to truthfulness and ready wit, respectively. Someone who has ready wit speaks at the right times and in the right ways, just like someone who listens virtuously listens to the right extent,[19] not short-changing speakers with curtailed attention or a refusal to engage in processing the content of what the speaker is saying, but establishing a relationship to the speaker in which one does not foreclose the speaker's communicative possibilities by giving inadequate attention to what she says. To get a clearer picture of what this right relationship to a speaker looks like when one does not foreclose her possibilities, let us look at what the listener *is* doing.

3) The Hidden Tasks of Listening: Salience-Response and Elaboration

To be sure, a listener deploys a variety of skilful infra-doings, which ordinarily are highly automated, like parsing an auditory linguistic signal; opening and reading a text message; identifying what sort of speech act is occurring (is it a request or a suggestion?), and drawing the relevant implicatures needed to understand the meaning and import of what has been said. These infra-doings may become conspicuous or more-than-usually intentional when the communicative process is obstructed by noise, linguistic error or inability on the part of the speaker, or when there is difficulty understanding. These infra-doings support hearing, reading, and understanding, which are as well infra-doings of the listening course of action. To describe the policy that is itself picked out by the verb 'listening', we require the concept of responsiveness described in the preceding section, where policies of responsiveness include both spontaneous, unthought reactions to a person's speech and thoughtful judgements about how one will respond to a speaker. We are more responsive to some people than to others, depending on a variety of factors, which leads to imbalances in the communicative potential of different speakers.

Such communicative imbalances can be understood, I propose, in terms of the power of the voices[20] involved in an exchange, especially the power of the voices to persuade or to gainsay each other. This power takes two forms. One is salience – that is, the immediate perceptual affective force of a voice. Voices of those whom we are inclined to trust are highly salient. Salience can increase on the basis of perceived prestige and gravitas, and the favourability, accessibility, or intelligibility of what

[18] Op. cit. note 11, Book IV.

[19] Aristotle does mention listening briefly in his description of the virtue of ready wit, saying "there is such a thing as saying – and again listening to – what one should and as one should" (Op. cit. note 11, 102–03.). He was right to note that there is such a thing as rightness in what one listens to and how, but his mere bracketed mention suggests that there is rather little to be said about listening rightly, compared to the important matter of speaking rightly. Needless to say, I disagree.

[20] I am not referring to the volume of the literal voice of a person, as in the sound produced by the larynx. Rather, I am using 'voice' in the same way we talk about having a voice in a conversation, which we often use to refer to spoken participation in person, or to representation of a person or set of people's views in a broader social discourse. For present purposes, in referring to a person's 'voice' I am referring to their capacity to communicate their concerns and their power to persuade. As such, the power of my 'voice' is relevant to my listening activity, even when my interlocutor is the one speaking. To clarify, think of the listener's voice as pointing to what the listener *would* say about the matter if she were speaking, and the power of her voice as pointing to the strength of her beliefs about the matter.

is being said. Salience can rise or fall on the basis of age, gender, race, accent, diction, dress, and skill in using conventions of politeness, spelling, and social ritual. These lists are far from comprehensive. The other form which vocal power takes derives from the listener's engagement with the content of what the speaker is saying. Someone who makes compelling arguments, using strong rhetoric and citing reliable sources and statistics, has more power to persuade me than someone who provides me with few such details for consideration. A person's vocal power can increase according to her rhetorical abilities even if she lacks certain salience-building features, as in the case of a dry, boring expert whose views are sought out and trusted despite a lack of charisma.

To clarify the difference between salience and content as features moderating vocal power, we will be helped by importing and repurposing some terminology from empirical studies in social psychology, concerned with persuasion and attitude change in contexts including, but not limited to, messaging in commercial advertising and political campaigning. Whilst empirical studies of attitude change have been popular from the early decades of social psychology research in the 1920s[21], it was not until the beginning of the 1980s that theories of attitude change found their feet, when two theories emerged: Petty and Cacioppo's theory which has become known as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)[22], and Chaiken's theory, known as the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM)[23]. Both models succeeded in coping with the above-mentioned complexity by positing two main processes of attitude change, rather than one. In this respect, these two theories 'have more in common than they have points of divergence'[24], and have together formed the foundation for much of the literature in persuasion studies since.

Whilst either of these theories would suit my purposes, I focus primarily on ELM, which proposes that the processes giving rise to attitude change fall on a continuum:

> …defined by how motivated and able people are to assess the central merits of a person, issue, or position... The more motivated and able people are to assess the central merits of the attitude object, the more likely they are to effortfully scrutinize all available object-relevant information.[25]

The term *elaboration* refers to the cognitive activity involved in effortful scrutiny. Where people are highly motivated and able to consider the content and context of a message, they engage in a high level of elaboration on the message. This process of attitude change is referred to as the *central route* of persuasion. When people are less motivated to engage in effortful elaboration, attitude change can result from less effortful processes, investing less in scrutinizing the message and responding more to salience cues and, as Chaiken rightly emphasizes, heuristics. Attitude change arrived at through low elaboration processes occurs through the *peripheral route*. A myriad of motivational and situational factors influences whether a message is processed more via the central route or the peripheral route – that is, whether a person engages in a high degree of elaboration and reflective scrutiny of content, or depends on efficiency measures like heuristics and salience cues to make judgements about the message.[26] Furthermore, according to each of the major contemporary models of attitude change including single as well as dual process models, "attitudes based on high amounts of thought are

[21] Paul A. M. van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins, *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 224, 246.
[22] Petty, Richard E. and Wegener, "Attitude Change: Multiple Roles for Persuasion Variables," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey (McGraw-Hill, 1997), 326–28.
[23] Op. cit. note 21, 246–66.
[24] Op. cit. note 21, 226.
[25] Op. cit. note 22, 326.
[26] Op. cit. note 21, 231.

proposed to be more persistent over time, resistant to attack, and predictive of behavior than attitudes formed or changed with little thought".[27]

As I have said above, we naturally find certain voices more salient to us than others. Suppose Sally's voice holds little salience for Joe on matters of driving and navigation, because Sally does not know how to drive. If Sally presents Joe with a message he is disinclined to accept – perhaps she is telling him that he has taken a wrong turn at the last roundabout – his tendency will be to dismiss what she is saying on the basis of little elaboration. The *assumption* he makes, correctly or not, is that because he perceives her to be an unreliable source and her message is unappealing, he can safely dismiss it without devoting a high degree of time and effortful activity elaborating on her message, 'reassuring' her confidently that he is on the correct road.

Joe is unlikely to listen to Sally unless she makes a specific bid for him to do so. When she indignantly cries, "You're not listening to me! I saw the sign for the turn we were meant to take. Do you really recognise this road?" she is asking Joe to abandon his heuristics on the basis of which he has been screening her message, and to instead engage with the actual content of her message. Perhaps if Joe does so, he will find that she has a valid point that is worth taking seriously, despite his initial assumptions and confidence in his navigational abilities over hers. Because the salience of her voice is low, and her message is averse to his self-concept as a superior navigator, he is not likely to be persuaded by her unless he makes a concession of elaboration in processing her message. This is something he might be unlikely to do, based on his peripheral judgements about Sally, unless she makes a point of asking him to engage more fairly with her message itself.

Alternatively, suppose a stranger whose voice has no particular salience to Joe offers him a message that he has no particular reason to contest. As Joe approaches his car in a car park, a stranger in a high-visibility jacket tells him that a certain bridge is flooded and that he should take an alternative route. It is likely that Joe will respond agreeably to the message via the peripheral, low-elaboration route. Although the stranger's voice has no personal salience for Joe, the non-adverse message is accompanied with the salience-booster of a high-visibility jacket. Joe is likely to be persuaded by the testimony without elaboration.[28]

What this language gives us is a way to conceptualise the activity constitutive of listening as a function of the listener's responsiveness to the speaker. The listener may by default take the speaker's voice to be authoritative, and so centres the speaker's message by reflex. The listener may alternatively hold the speaker's voice to be important to him, and so centres the speaker's message by choice, in accordance with his policy of responsiveness towards that person. When this is so, the listener may even need to invest some work on the speaker's behalf, filling in the gaps in the spoken message or conscientiously resisting prejudice, in order to ensure that he captures the most viable interpretation of what the speaker is saying and centres it, in the dialogue and in his own view, in order to ensure that the speaker has the best possible chance of persuading him. As a paradigm case, consider a parent listening to a small child: the child's diction may be very unclear, her grammar lacking, and she doesn't know many words yet. Nevertheless, because her voice is deeply important

[27] Jamie Barden and Richard E. Petty, "The Mere Perception of Elaboration Creates Attitude Certainty: Exploring the Thoughtfulness Heuristic," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **95**, no. 3 (September 2008): 489.

[28] I am sidestepping the considerable literature about epistemology of testimony, since the issue of whether a person listens to someone arises right where normal responsiveness to testimony ends. For one fairly recent overview, see the collection of essays edited by Lackey and Sosa (Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa, *The Epistemology of Testimony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

to the parent, he or she will invest great amounts of effort in decoding the child's syllables and drawing inferences as necessary in order to discover what the child is trying to say.

On the other hand, a listener who fails or refuses to do this is he who instead employs against the speaker a policy of non-responsiveness. The speaker's voice is not taken to be important; the speaker's message will be processed with minimal effort from the listener on the speaker's behalf, and if the message is not amenable enough to the speaker to persuade him from the periphery, then it does not deserve to be centred. On such a policy, rather than giving the speaker the best possible chance to succeed, the listener sets a metaphorical bouncer at the door of his more central processing route: if a speaker, her voice, or her message are not perceived to be amenable on the basis of salience cues and heuristic processing, they are not even admitted for due consideration, let alone offered the support of the listener investing his own elaborative effort in ensuring the most viable interpretation of the speaker's message gets through.

4) A Relation of Managed Openness

Thus far I have argued that listening is a virtue referring to a course of action, in that the tasks of listening include a wide variety of infra-doings subordinate to a policy of establishing a certain kind of relation to a speaker. That relation should be one of sufficient openness as to allow the listener to adequately and rightly respond to the speaker's message, which requires that the listener actively avoid closing herself off to the speaker's message. In ELM terms, the relation of openness established by a virtuous listener can be described as a commitment to not letting the salience-based efficiencies of peripheral route processing block a message from being processed by a more central route when required or requested. The core task of listening then is not the processing of speakers' *claims*, but the establishing and maintaining of such adequately open and responsive relations to *the speakers themselves*. In the section that follows, I argue that the responsiveness of the listener does not entail that the listener always processes a person's speech through central routing; such a policy would be inefficient and unnecessary. Instead, the responsive listener makes use of both peripheral and central processing routes, but manages the routing of messages through those routes according to a policy by which the results of peripheral route processing cannot *block* or *preclude* a message from being centred in the listener's attention when called for.

The moral significance of managing how one routes messages emerges when we view the routing as an opportunity for equalising the power difference between our voices and those of others. By dedicating our elaboration efforts to the communicative attempts of those we might otherwise find questionable, we give them a fairer chance to be heard and to persuade. Likewise, if a message's content seems garbled, but I recognise the speaker as someone who is probably reliable despite being unskilled in our language, then I could use these salience cues to motivate a highly engaged, gap-filling level of elaboration to ensure I adequately process the message. As our perceptions and heuristics are developed over time and become refined and made more reliable, our activity of listening serves to interrogate the assumptions we are primed to make about the voices of others. A fully virtuous listener would be one who habitually avoids the pitfall of dismissing others' claims on the basis of peripheral route processing where greater elaboration was required. On the way to developing such acuity, we err on the side of central processing, double-checking our judgements made via peripheral route processing by following them up with central route processing. When someone makes a direct appeal – 'You're not listening to me!' – we abandon our peripheral route options until we are confident we have done justice to the speaker in our consideration of their message.

By extension, when listening to small children or language learners whose voices' power is diminished due to limited language ability, we broaden the set of elaboration-related infra-doings involved in listening. The centring of the messages of linguistically limited voices using a high degree of elaboration from the listener may not correspond so much to a shift from salience-based reaction to reasoned response; rather, the shift towards effortful activity on the listener's part may correspond more to the listener committing a high degree of effort to piecing together the other person's message through patient close attention, guesswork, filling in the gaps, and devoting as much labour as necessary to the inferential labour of sussing out the speaker's meaning. In this claim I am extending the notions of elaboration and central route processing from their original meaning in social psychology, to include a broader set of activities that may be seconded to the course of action of listening to someone. At issue is the listener's investment of effortfulness in centring the speaker's message, as a factor of how much importance the listener places on the speaker and of the listener's willingness to respond duly to the speaker's communication. The following imagined scenario between Sally and her dentist illuminates the dynamics at play:

As a general rule, Sally does not expect her voice to hold a high level of salience when, to make chat, she tells her dentist that her mouth feels fine and seems healthy. Contrariwise, the diagnostic claims that the dentist makes as a result of his examination of Sally's mouth hold a high degree of salience for Sally, who will likely believe whatever the dentist tells her on account of the dentist's professional expertise and having just performed a detailed exam. The white coat eliminates Sally's need to elaborate on the dentist's claims before believing them.

Now, suppose Sally feels terrible pain on one side of her mouth. She tells this to the dentist, who nevertheless persistently replies that everything looks perfectly fine: Sally is wrong to think she has a dental problem. Unconvinced, Sally makes a bid for the dentist to listen to her account, describing in detail what the pain feels like and where it is located. How the dentist responds to Sally's claims will reveal her policy of responsiveness towards her patient. In a normal encounter, because the dentist cares for his patient's wellbeing, the dentist would then centre Sally's claims in his attention. Using Sally's descriptions as clues to what problems he may be looking for, the dentist investigates until he is able to offer reasonably satisfactory diagnosis and treatment for Sally's pain. But suppose this dentist is a particularly unvirtuous, callous listener. He might persist in telling Sally that her mouth is perfectly fine despite the severe pain, perhaps even suggesting that Sally is imagining her pain, being overly dramatic, or lying. Because the callous dentist is unwilling to centre Sally's claims and clings exclusively to his heuristics, viewing patients as non-experts and unreliable diagnosticians of dental health, he dismisses Sally's claims without adequate elaboration and ultimately fails to provide the required dental care.

The foregoing example allows us to locate the specific wrong done to a speaker when one refuses to listen to her. The callous dentist's *commitment* to judging Sally's message on the basis of peripheral salience cues has the effect of blocking the message from her more central routes of processing. Contrary to the classic picture of listening as passive reception of speech, my account presents listening as involving active tasks of managing how one processes and responds to others on the basis of one's willingness to centre, elaborate on, and respond to the other person's speech. These tasks, together with a variety of other infra-doings, comprise the activity by which a listener establishes and maintains relationships of greater or lower degrees of openness towards speakers, based on the listener's policy of responsiveness.

The openness of the relationship a listener maintains towards a speaker is of moral importance: to avoid wronging her in her capacity as a speaker, the listener must avoid blocking her voice from being centred on the basis of peripheral judgements about her importance or her message.

To block someone in such a way is, simply, to refuse to listen to her. This view allows us to make sense of familiar comments like, "My boss sadly did not agree to my request, but at least she listened to me!" Such a comment usually indicates that the listener has given adequate consideration to the content of the speaker's claims and evidenced a sufficient degree of elaboration to assure the speaker that her claims were being taken seriously, even though the final result from the listener was not one of agreement. The boss is praised for listening because of how she managed her openness to the speaker's claims under a fair policy of responsiveness.

An advantage of identifying listening with this managed openness is that it allows us to avoid two pitfalls, namely, identifying listening with simply being persuaded, and identifying listening with processing all messages through maximally central routes. One who has mastered virtuous listening still has the option of processing some messages by peripheral routes, and still had the option to maintain her view rather than be persuaded by every message that comes her way. To explain how these options can remain open to a virtuous listener, let us now consider what the excellence looks like in one who is fully in possession of the virtue of listening justly.

5) Mastering the Virtue of Listening Justly

Naturally, the learning process for acquiring the virtue in question requires trial, error, and practice. Practising involves doubting and double checking one's instincts about which communicative encounters can be processed via peripheral routes. The notion of heuristics is particularly useful on this point. Heuristics arise on the basis of patterns which we can (presumably) expect to remain fairly stable. As a person accrues experience in interacting with different kinds of people, the plurality of those experiences lends increasing nuance to the patterns the person trusts enough to deploy as a heuristic. By erring on the side of caution, double-checking pheripheral judgements, and interrogating one's own listening practices, one's heuristics become attuned to note which situations call for higher levels of elaboration. Once a person becomes so well practised that she can consistently make right judgements about how much elaboration is required in a given situation to ensure that speakers are done justice, her efficiency measures do not mislead her from adequately listening to people.

The instinct-refining learning process establishes within the fully virtuous listener a stance of openness towards others which is just. The exemplary listener is rightly open, responsive, and attentive to others. Where those others have reduced communicative capacity or voices with low salience, the listener engages the speaker's communiques with increasingly high levels of elaboration, until justice is had. Rather than posing the ideal listener as someone who is maximally detached, I pose the ideal listener as someone who is maximally engaged, devoting higher levels of her own cognitive resources to the processing of speakers' messages in order to achieve justice.

While it is true that increased elaboration aims at rectifying a speaker's reduced communicative capacity by focusing the listener on the content of the speaker's message, this does not entail that the listener becomes more detached, *pace* Beatty[29], but that the listener becomes increasingly invested in the people to whom she listens and in supporting them in their capacity as speakers. As such, I argue that the ends the listener has in view are to be sufficiently engaged in the communicative exchange to do justice to the speaker, rather than construing the ends as having to do with perfect understanding of or acquiescence to the speaker's message. Although these two might seem likely candidates for the ends of listening, they give rise to three problems.

[29] Op. cit. note 5, 285–290.

First, taking an achievement – full understanding or acquiescence – as the ends of listening is problematic, since maintaining just policies of responsiveness is a dynamic and ongoing process. This virtue is not held to a bounded criterion, such as 'fully grasping the speaker's meaning', nor, as I have said, can we take listening to entail agreement, belief, or compliance with a speaker's desired result. We can in some cases see where people are satisfied with a person's response in a communicative exchange, even though the results of the exchange are not what they wished. While people are more likely to accept someone's non-agreeing or non-cooperating responses to us if we first feel that they have genuinely listened to us, there is no guarantee that successful listening will make for a satisfied speaker.

Second, problems arise if we postulate that the end or aim of listening is to grasp a full and complete understanding the speaker, since it is doubtful whether such a result is even possible, let alone in all cases desirable. Certainly, being understood would be an imagined *ideal* result to which many speakers aspire, but it is doubtful whether such an ideal is truly possible to achieve: how fully can one understand someone else's experience? It is further doubtful that, even if a listener *should* happen to succeed in perfectly imagining the speaker's experience, that the listener would be able to *know* that she had been so successful. Indeed, it often seems that when a listener claims to have fully understood exactly what the speaker feels, she curtails the speaker's communicative efforts and can block the progress of the exchange, while a listener who acknowledges straightforwardly that she does *not* entirely understand the speaker's experience has motivation to centre the speaker's voice in an ongoing dialogue.

A third problem is that speakers may not always be able, in terms of their communicative abilities, to successfully convey what they want to say. As a matter of language processing, we might assume that one can only be successful as a listener in proportion to the linguistic and rhetorical success of the speaker, but this cannot be right. Not only would this assumption make the requirement for listening from those in authority dependent on the vulnerable communicative skills of those under them, which would be worrisome, the assumption also contradicts the very premise of the work involved in listening. The parent assists the child in communicating; the doctor helps the patient to identify the correct descriptions for his experience, and the native speaker patiently uses her imagination to make sense of a language learner's unusual idiom, so that communication can occur despite language mistakes.

Therefore, in light of these three problems, the end of listening should not be pinned on an achievement construed as perfective, like having grasped or understood the other's meaning. Instead, listening more closely follows the unbounded structure of relational virtues like friendship, which is fulfilled not when the relationship with a friend is ended, but when it is established. Listening is in this way dissimilar to more episodic virtues like generosity, the ends of which are fulfilled when the need for generosity has been met and the donation event has ceased. By identifying the ends of just listening as the establishing and maintaining of relationships of managed openness to the claims of others, we may be able to make sense of situations in which a listener never manages to understand quite what a speaker is saying, or does not manage to agree to what the speaker is saying, but nevertheless invests a great deal of effortful activity in centring the speaker's claims, refusing to block that speaker's access to the listener's central processing route or to consign that speaker's voice to the periphery of one's considerations.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have illuminated the mistake of assuming that listening is simply a non-active result arising from being spoken to. Listening is difficult to pin to a singular activity due to the wide array of behaviours which can be involved in listening, but as we have seen, this is because listening is an activity at the policy level, coordinating a diversity of subordinate infra-doings in support of a policy of responsiveness towards a speaker. Since a policy of responsiveness involves making decisions about how important a speaker's words are, and on that basis, how much effort we are willing to invest in centring and processing their messages, it follows straightforwardly that how we listen to people is a determiner of how we treat others, and so is important to our character. A good listener is judicious in managing how she routes speakers' messages through peripheral (heuristic- and salience-based, low effort processing) or more central (content- and context-based, high effort processing) routes. If one chooses to treat a person in the manner of refusing to listen to her speech, blocking the speaker's message from having access to sufficiently central processing routes, one commits an injustice against the speaker. It remains for an account to be given about exactly *how* this injustice works against the speaker – that is to say, the next project is to shift from an analysis of listening as a matter of the *listener's* character, to listening as an action with direct consequences on speakers. Nevertheless, the account I have given here arguably holds substantial implications for how a robust theory of listening might interrogate or complement standard assumptions in philosophy of language and ethics of communication, revealing the active structure of listening and its importance for one's character.[30]

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